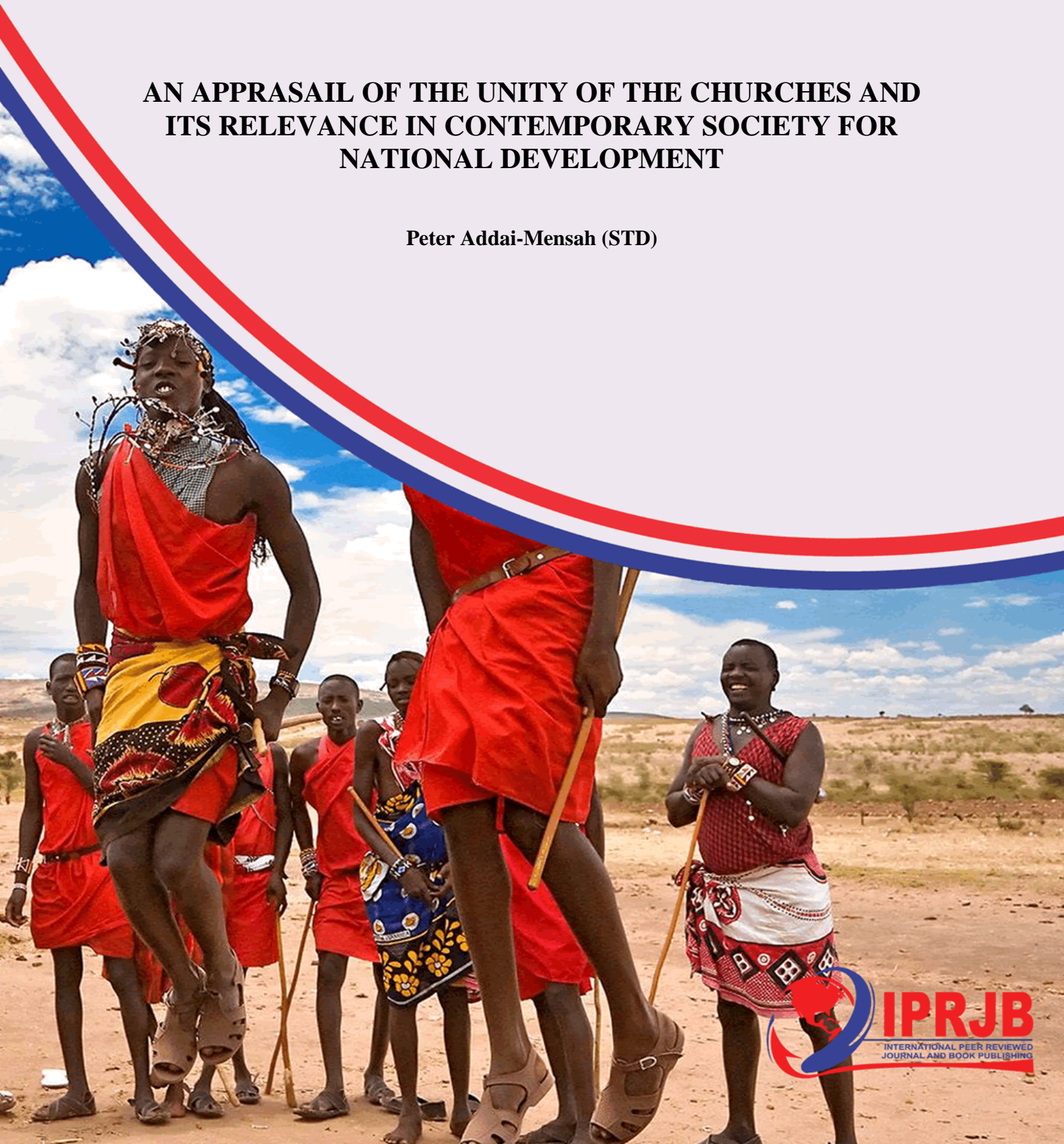


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AN APPRASAIL OF THE UNITY OF THE CHURCHES AND ITS RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Jesus came into the world mainly to proclaim the Reign/Kingdom of God – cf. Mk. 1: 14 – 15. This Reign of God is a mystery. It is beyond human comprehension and understanding. To help us to understand the mysterious nature of the Reign of God, Jesus used images and parables to depict and teach about the inner dynamics of the Reign of God – cf. Matt. 13: 1 ff. According to Jesus, no human being can bring about the Reign of God. It is God who initiates and brings it about. In the course of his ministry, he got some followers who later on grew into the Church. After staying with them, forming them for some time, he sent them on mission. The mission was very specific - to preach about the Reign of God – cf. Matt. 10:1-25. In this article the author discusses among other things: Jesus on unity among his disciples: Unity in the Early church in the Acts of the Apostles: Division in the cause of the History of the Church: The Church and National Development and Efforts towards Unity among the Churches. In this article the author does not use either the qualitative or the quantitative or the mixed methods. Instead the literary approach is used. In other words, library sources are used.

Key words: Unity, Church and National Development.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Human nature is such that we all have biases, opinions and preferences. As it is often said, opinions are like noses, everyone has one. As social beings, humans are inter-related and inter-connected. To succeed in life, one needs to bond together and do a lot of networking. It becomes more crucial when one wants to succeed in a group. It calls for unity. The importance of unity cannot be over-emphasised as far as its significance on human development, growth and progress are concerned. From time immemorial, unity among peoples, groups and communities has been talked about. In talking about unity in the Church, the author is not advocating for uniformity. Diversity is beautiful and highly acknowledged as compared to a garden made up of different kinds of flowers. What the author is advocating for is diversity geared towards unity. We read from the early Christian communities especially in the Pauline churches that they were varieties in terms of governance. While some were Episcopal, others were Presbyteral and still others were Charismatic.

2.0 UNITY IN THE CHURCH

Jesus' Time

On coming into the world, Jesus made his intention very clear. He came principally to inaugurate or preach about the Reign or Kingship or Kingdom of God – (cf. Mk. 1: 15). In the course of his ministry, he moved from place to place preaching about the Reign of God. His message touched the hearts of people and they followed him. Sooner than later his message spread like a bushfire in the harmattan season. In the course of time, his ministry became a movement with large people following him. Knowing about human nature, Jesus began to set up various features in order to organise his followers. He first chose the Twelve (12) to form the nucleus of the movement. In addition to that, there was an *inner cabinet* – namely Peter, James and John – among the Twelve (12). These three (3) were always with Jesus. They witnessed most of his great works and miracles – (cf. Lk. 8: 49 -56; Matt. 17: 1-13; Matt. 26: 30-46).

Recognising the importance of unity, Jesus made sure that all forms of divisions and anger that raised their ugly heads among the disciples were nibbed in the bud – (cf. Mk. 10: 35-45). Furthermore, in order that the disciples will always remain united, he enjoined them to stay in love – (Jn. 13: 34-35). In addition to that he prayed earnestly to his Father before his ascension so that his disciples will always stay united – (cf. Jn. 17: 6-19). It must be pointed out that Jesus did not pray only for his immediate disciples but also for those who through the preaching of the disciples would become believers – (cf. Jn. 17: 20-23). In summary, Jesus was very particular about unity among his followers so that the ministry he was leaving to them would succeed.

The Apostolic Era

When the apostles took over, they guarded judiciously the unity that Jesus had bequeathed to them. In the Acts of the Apostles, after the Ascension, they gathered together in the Upper Room where they stayed and prayed together waiting for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit – (cf. Acts 1: 12-26). When the Spirit finally came, due to the preaching of the apostles, many people from different parts of the world joined them to form a new People of God. As Benedict XVI (1996: 43) notes,

The image of Pentecost presented in the Acts of the Apostles shows the interplay of plurality and unity and in this sense teaches us to perceive the distinctive character of the Holy Spirit as opposed to the spirit of the world. The spirit of the world subjugates the Holy Spirit opens. The church embraces the many languages, that is, the many cultures, that in faith understand and fecundate one another. In this respect, it can be said that we find here a preliminary sketch of a church that lives in manifold and multiform particular churches but that precisely in this way is one church.

It must be pointed out that the unity that existed among the early Christian believers was very clear. They were described as having *one heart and one mind* – (cf. Acts 2:44). A time came when the increase in number resulted in disputes among the widows of Jewish and Greek origins regarding the distribution of food. To deal with the issue so as to maintain the unity, the diaconate ministry was established – (cf. Acts 6:1-60). It must be acknowledged that the fellowship and the unity among the early Christians were so exemplary that it was in Antioch that they were first called *Christians* – (cf. Acts 11:26).

One cannot end discussion on the unity in the church among the early Christians without reference to the Jerusalem Council in AD 49. As the number began to increase, non-Jews were entering into the church. Some people of Jewish origin were insisting in Antioch that the non-Jews should undergo Jewish practices like circumcision before they could become Christians. Paul and Barnabas vehemently opposed this. A decision was reached to refer the case to the Apostles in Jerusalem. After a lengthy discussion, a decision was reached. This decision helped to prevent the church from disintegrating. As noted by Norbert Brockman and Umberto Pescantini (1996: 20),

Of tremendous importance in the early church was the Council of Jerusalem. Here it was officially decided that the gentiles could become Christians without passing through Judaism. This decision transformed the church from a Jewish sect into a community embracing people from all races and nations.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Apostles worked tirelessly to maintain and promote unity in the early church.

The Patristic Period

With regard to unity in the church during the Patristic period, two (2) people stand tall among the others. They are Ignatius of Antioch and Cyprian of Carthage.

Ignatius of Antioch (AD. 35 – 108).

Ignatius was born in AD 35. He later on became the Bishop of Antioch, a throne once occupied by Peter. In the course of his ministry, he was sent to Rome for trial. He suffered martyrdom in AD 108 by being thrown into the amphitheatre to be devoured by wild beasts.

On his way to Rome, he made some stops in Asia Minor. He wrote six (6) letters to some churches and one to Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna. The six (6) letters were written to the

Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, Romans, Philadelphians and Smyrnaeans. Themes that run through the letters were Ecclesiology, Sacraments of the church and the Role of the Bishop.

Ignatius' desire for unity in the church was very dear to his heart. He based this on the unity that exists among the Trinity. As Pope Benedict XVI (2008: 14) points out:

For Ignatius, unity was first and foremost a prerogative of God, who since He exists as Three Persons, is one in absolute unity. Ignatius often used to repeat that God is unity and that in God alone is unity found in its pure and original state. Unity to be brought about on this earth by Christians is no more than an initiation as close as possible to the divine archetype.

Ignatius' place in the promotion of unity among the churches is seen in his discussion on the role of the Bishop. Speaking on unity in the church, Ignatius (www.theologicalmovement.blogspot.com) had this to say,

See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles and reverence the deacons as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the church without the Bishop. [...] Wherever the Bishop shall appear, there let the multiple [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. [...] Whatsoever [the Bishop] shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid.

He goes on to say:

Let all things therefore be done by you with good order in Christ. Let the laity be subject to the deacons; the deacons to the presbyters; the presbyters to the bishop; the bishop to Christ, even as He is to the Father.

In short, for Ignatius of Antioch unity in the church is very paramount. It is modelled on the perfect unity among the Triune God.

Cyprian of Carthage (200 – 258)

Cyprian was born around 200 in Carthage present-day Tunisia. He became the Bishop around 248 or 249. He suffered martyrdom around 258. As a Bishop, Cyprian was very particular about the unity in the Church. Among his readings most of which are extinct, was *The Lapsed: The Unity of the Catholic Church* (1957: 1).

When Cyprian wrote this book, Decius had become Emperor in 249. As an Emperor, he saw some weakness in the empire which was the worship of various gods. In pursuance of unity in the empire, the abolished sacrificing to any other god except the gods of the empire.

Accordingly, he issued an edict to that effect. All the citizens of the empire were to demonstrate that they had offered the sacrifice. A *libellous* was to be signed as evidence. While some rushed to offer the sacrifice (*Sacrificati*), others pretended to have offered the sacrifice (*Libellatici*). They were still others who boldly refused to offer the sacrifice and consequently suffered martyrdom. Afterwards, both the *Sacrificati* and *Libellatici* wanted to come back to the church but were refused. After some deliberations, both Rome and Carthage agreed that the Lapsed (*Sacrificati* and *Libellatici*) should be received after penance has been done.

In the book, Cyprian praised God for the end of the persecution and return of peace to the Church (1957: 2). In addition to that, he praised the confessors - those who stood firm (1957: 2). On the other hand, he sympathized with the Lapsed (1957: 4). He chastised them because according to him, they could have fled but because of their attachment to possession, they offered the sacrifice. He believed that The *Libellatici* as well as *The Sacrificati* needed to do penance before their return to the church. He was of the opinion that true repentance will bring mercy from God (1957: 10-11).

On the unity of the church, Cyprian points to the Primacy of Peter. As an indication of the church, he used images like the sun and its rays, the river and its springs, the tree and its branches to emphasize on the unity of the church – (www.theologicalmovement.blogspot.com). According to Cyprian, “whoever turns his back on the church of Christ shall not come to the rewards of Christ: he is an alien, a world ling, an enemy. He said, *you cannot have God for your Father if you have not the church for your mother. In his opinion, whoever breaks the peace and harmony of Christ acts against Christ: whoever gathers elsewhere than in the church scatters the church of Christ* – (www.theologicalmovement.blogspot.com).

3.0 DIVISION IN THE CHURCH

The unity of the church that had been judiciously guarded in previous periods was shattered in the course of the history of the church. The two most significant events that destroyed the unity of the church were: The Great Schism and The Reformation.

The Great Schism

In 1054, there was a breakdown between the Eastern and the Western churches between the Greek and the Latin Churches; between Constantinople and Rome respectively. Prior to the 1054 Schism, there had been ecclesiastical differences and theological disputes between the two churches. Prominent among them were: The source of the Holy Spirit; whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used for the Eucharist; The Bishop of Rome’s claim to universal jurisdiction and the place of the See of Constantinople in relation to Pentarchy. According to Norbert Brockman and Umberto Pescantini (1992:93) even in Schism, the Byzantine and Catholic churches recognized each other’s sacraments and common priesthood. Nevertheless, the enduring character of the separation is shown by the fact that only in 1964 did Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras remove the excommunications, during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land – (1992: 93). In their opinion, The Great Schism was a major blow to Christian unity.

Reformation

Another event that shattered this time the Latin (Western) church into pieces was The Reformation in 1517. It was by Martin Luther and continued by Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin and other Protestant Reformers. It all started with the publication of 95 theses by Martin Luther in 1517 and lasted until the end of the Thirty Years war in 1648- (1978:78). It must be pointed out that Martin Luther was not the only reformer in the church. Earlier attempts to reform the Catholic church were made by Jan Hus, Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe and others (1978: 51). With regard to the Protestant Reformation, the issues at stake among other things were: Sale of indulgences; The Pope had no authority over purgatory; Merits of the saints not biblically based. Other doctrinal changes were: Reliance on Scripture as the only source of proper belief (*Sola Scriptura*); Faith in Jesus and not good works, is the only way to obtain God's pardon for sin (*Sola fide*) – (1978: 51).

4.0 THE CHURCH AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Reign/Kingdom of God and Society

It was said earlier on that Jesus came into this world to proclaim or inaugurate the Reign/kingdom of God. This Reign of God is not of this world. Nobody brings it about. It cannot be compared to any worldly kingdom. Rather, the Reign or Kingdom that Jesus talked about is heavenly. It is God who initiates it and brings it about. – (cf. Matt.13: 31-33). Human beings do not contribute to it. This does not mean that the Reign of God has nothing to do with earthly communities or societies. The values of the Reign/ Kingdom of God which are justice, peace and joy from the Holy Spirit – (cf. Rom. 14:17) are to be replicated here on earth. It is for this reason that the Church and for that Christians have a duty and responsibility to bring the Gospel values to the world. The fact that Christians are pilgrims here on earth and are on pilgrimage to heaven does not mean that they should adopt a laissez-faire attitude towards the world. In this way, they would be neglecting their Christian duties jeopardizing their own salvation – (1977: no. 43). The Church, therefore, is enjoined to work for the development of this earth. After all, entrance into the Reign/Kingdom of God begins from here. It will depend on what an individual does here on earth – (cf. Rom. 14: 7 – 12).

The Church

By church in this article, the author means the whole Christian movement. It refers to all Christian denominations. The author, therefore, agrees with Roger Height (1987: 44) when he states that the Church, *does not mean or refer to any particular church, whether local, confessional, regional or institutionally united church to the exclusion of other churches. Rather, the word Church includes all the Christian churches.*

The church is a sacrament of Christ. It represents Jesus Christ. It does not exist for itself. It exists purposely to carry on the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. This is the mandate in the Great Commission given to the Church by Jesus Christ – (cf. Matt 28: 19 – 28).

The Church and Evangelization

Consequently, the church exists to carry on what Jesus came to do, that is to evangelize. Therefore, evangelization is the core of the church's ministry. As a church, it does not exist for itself. It is sent to the world. As Juan Segundo (1973:1) once said, "to be a Christian is to belong to a community that has been sent".

In the opinion of Pope Paul VI (1974: no. 18), “Evangelization means bringing the Good News into all the state of humanity and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new”. According to him (1974: 63),

Evangelization loses much as its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.

It means therefore, that church’s evangelizing ministry is general principally towards the development, growth and progress of the human person. It is against this backdrop that Pope Paul VI (1963: no. 1) in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* stated;

The development of peoples has the church’s close attention, particularly the development of those peoples who are striving to escape from hunger, misery, endemic diseases and ignorance; of those who are looking for wider share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are aiming purposefully at their complete fulfillment.

Just as Jesus was for the total liberation and salvation of humanity, in the same way is the church very concerned about the whole of the human person. One can say without any shred of doubt that the mission of the church is not only found in the proclamation of the gospel.

Following from the above, it shows that the church and for that matter Christians have the duty and responsibility towards National Development. Christians must participate actively and fully in all national issues. It is incumbent upon them to contribute their quota to National Development. Christians are to scrutinize all national politics and programs to make sure that they promote human dignity and lead to the progress of the people.

In addition to this, the church and Christians are always to be prophetic as far as National Development is concerned. They are to denounce anything that is ungodly and inhibit the development of the citizenry. This is what Pope John Paul II (2009: 210) said when he met the Youth during his Pastoral Visit in 1982.

As young people, you should constantly strive to identify the ills of your society, such as bribery and corruption, the embezzlement of government or company funds, extravagant and unproductive spending, the parade of wealth, neglect of the poor and the friendless, nepotism, tribalism, political antagonism, denial of the rights of the poor, abortion, contraception and other evils which also ravage other countries. As true youth you will see, judge and then act according to the criteria of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In summary, as the church continues the ministry of Jesus, it must be concerned about the whole person. It must be interested in National Development in order to promote the human dignity and the common good of all human beings.

5.0 ATTEMPTS AT UNITY

It has been pointed out earlier on that for the church to realise its mission in the world, it must be united. With a common front, it will be able to achieve that. However, the disunity among the various churches is a disincentive to evangelization in the world. In fact, it is scandalous in the world. It is against this backdrop that the participants at the second Vatican II worked

towards unity among churches. They felt that it was not good for the various churches to go the own separate ways even though they all profess faith in Jesus Christ as if Christ was divided. This contradicts the will of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it is a scandal to the world and hinders the work of evangelization to the world as noted in the Degree on Ecumenism – (Flannery Austin: 1975: no.1). In pursuance of this, there have been efforts to bring the various Christian Churches together.

Unity between the Greek and Latin Churches

The Great Schism that occurred in 1054 that divided the church to East (Greek) and West (Latin) churches was healed in 1964 when Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI revoked the excommunication during the latter's pilgrimage to the Holy Lord (www.papalartifacts.com).

Unity between the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic Churches

After many centuries of division in the church resulting from the Reformation due to doctrinal issues, the Lutheran World Federation and The Roman Catholic church on 1st October, 1999 came together to issue a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. This was after many decades of dialogue - (www.lutheranworld.org).

Unity between Christian Council of Ghana and the Catholic Bishops Conference

It is worthy to note that over the years, the Christian Council of Ghana and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Ghana have been cooperating towards National Development. There are numerous occasions that the two bodies have come together to move the Nation forward. These, they have done through Communiqués, Memoranda and Pastoral Letters. Some of the National issues that the two religious bodies have deliberated on include;

- Meeting with the Head of State and Chairman of the Supreme Military Council in 1978.
- Memorandum to the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council in 1979.
- Pastoral Letters on General Elections in 1992.
- Seminar on “Ghana Economy: Which Way Forward?” in 1995.
- Conference on Religious Bodies Registration Law (PNDCL, 221) in 1989 – (1999: 19-273).

It is an undeniable fact that the Christian Council of Ghana and the Catholic Bishops' Conference have contributed immensely towards National Development.

On 8th May, 2015, they issued a Joint Press Statement. Issues discussed included;

- ❖ National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS).
- ❖ Church – State Partnership in Education.
- ❖ Ghana's Economy.
- ❖ District Assembly Elections and 2016 General Elections.
- ❖ Constitution Review Process.
- ❖ Petroleum Exploration and Revenue Management.
- ❖ Power Outages in Ghana (Dumsor).
- ❖ Persecution of Christians in the World.
- ❖ Migration outside Africa – (1999: 139-144).

In addition to the collaborative efforts of the two religious bodies towards National Development, they come together to organise Christian Unity Week and Christian Home Week. During these events, various Christian denominations come together in different churches to pray and discuss issues pertaining to National Development.

Unity with Pentecostal/ Charismatic Council and Non – Aligned Christian Churches

The collaboration and effort between The Christian Council and the Catholic Bishops' Conference towards National Development cannot be said to be the same with the Pentecostal/ Charismatic Council and Non – Aligned Christian churches. These two latter religious bodies seem to be on their own. Many of them are not well organized. In situation where some fall out of line no one chastises them to bring them into line. In some way, the activities and behaviours of some Christian churches bring Christianity into disrepute. This in doubt affects the authenticity and credibility of the Christian religion.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Before his ascension into heaven, Jesus prayed so that the apostles will be one just as he and the Father are one – (cf. Jn. 17:20). In addition to that he prayed that those who will become believers through the preaching of the apostle will also be one – (cf. Jn. 17:20). As said earlier on the division among in the Church is a scandal to the world. As attempts are being to foster unity, the various churches must do the following:

1. Eschew all forms of superiority complex.
2. Discard any biases and prejudices
3. Be ready for open and sincere dialogue
4. See themselves always as one people serving the same God
5. That there is a common origin and destination of all humanity.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The importance of the unity in the church cannot be over emphasised. The church does not exist for itself. It exists for the world. Christians therefore, have a duty and responsibility towards the betterment of the world. This calls for patriotism. It is incumbent upon all Christians to contribute towards National Development. For this to be realised all Christians must speak with one voice. The disunity among Christians is a scandal and a hindrance towards National Development.

However, it must be emphasised that the article is not advocating for uniformity. The diversity among the Christian denominations must be geared towards unity that will go a long way to contribute and promote National Development.

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